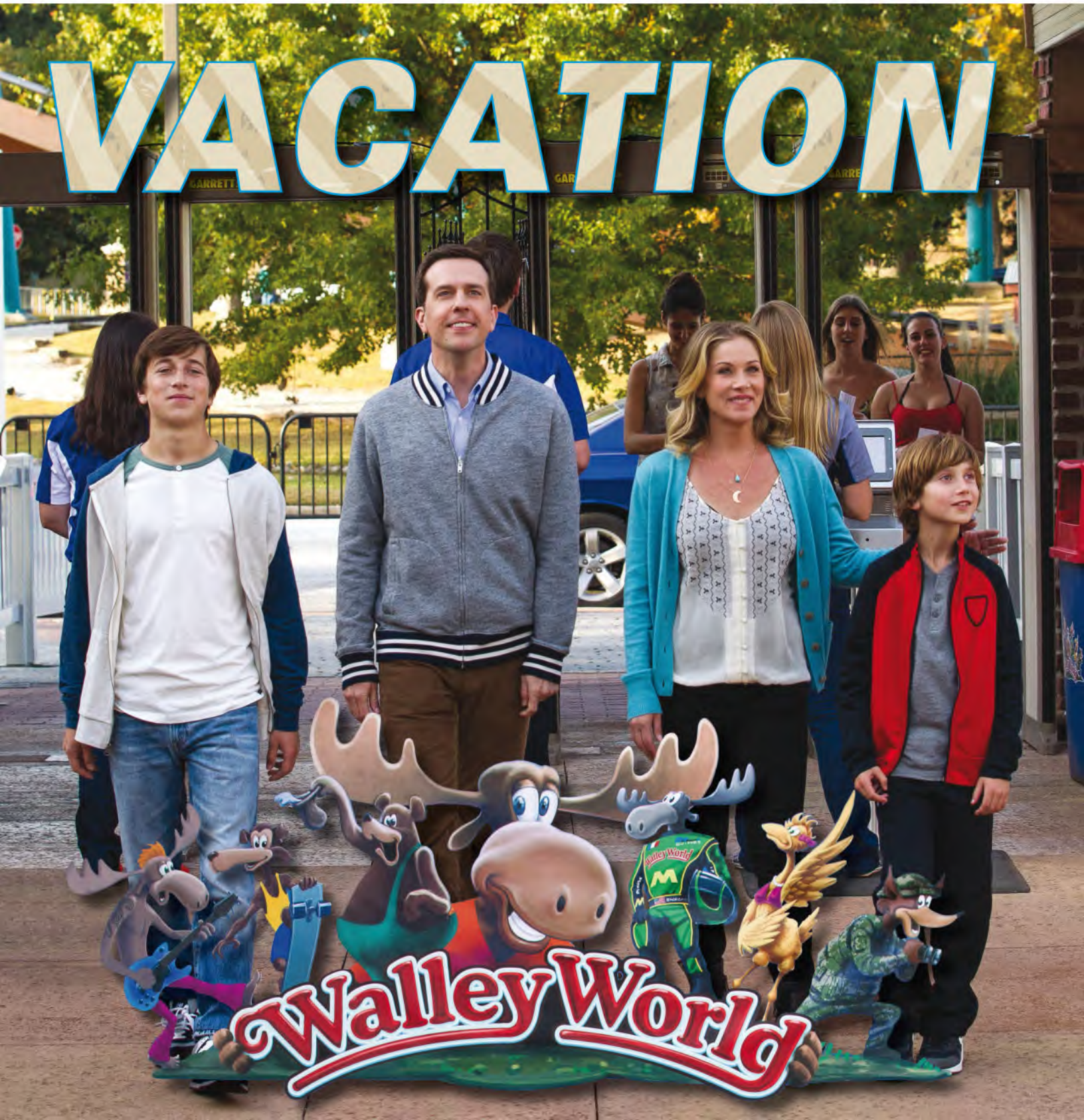
FILM JOURNAL INTERNATIONAL

A Prometheus Global Media Publication

August 2015

Equipment, Concessions and Services Guide, pgs. 56-77

NAC Convention, pgs. 42-55



Chevy Chase and Beverly D'Angelo return for the sequel with Ed Helms, Christina Applegate, and Skyler Gisondo and Steele Stebbins as the third-generation Griswolds.

Hopper Stone ©Warner Bros.

SON OF VACATION

by ETHAN ALTER

THE NEXT GENERATION OF GRISWOLDS MAKES THE PILGRIMAGE

Forget what the calendar says: In 2015, summer vacation officially begins on July 29. That's the date that the venerable *Vacation* franchise rides back into theatres, exactly 22 years to the day after Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) led his family on an ill-fated trip to Walley World in an ugly tan-and-green colored Wagon Queen Family Truckster. And while Clark and his long-suffering wife Ellen (Beverly D'Angelo) are back—albeit briefly—for this new *Vacation*, the man in the driver's seat is their son Rusty (Ed Helms), all grown up and bound for Walley World with his own brood: his spouse Debbie (Christian Applegate) and their bickering children James and Kevin (Skyler Gisondo and Steele Stebbins).

But the apple hasn't fallen especially far from the tree. Having survived multiple vacation disasters as a child and teenager, Rusty maintains Clark's aggressive optimism in the face of catastrophic mishaps that would fell even the hardiest of souls. Whether shooting the Arizona rapids with a suicidal guide or being arrested for public indecency, Rusty and his family are enjoying the kind of road trip that makes you never want to leave your front driveway, let alone the living room.

The men responsible for testing Rusty's mettle are writer-directors John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein, longtime writing partners (their credits include *Horrible Bosses* and *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*) making their feature directorial debuts. Born in 1985, two years after the original *Vacation* premiered, Daley wasn't a pop-culture child of the '80s, but he played one on TV—specifically the beloved Paul Feig/Judd Apatow series, "Freaks and Geeks," where his geeky alter ego, Sam

Weir, would have been the target audience for the Harold Ramis-directed hit, based on a *National Lampoon* story penned by John Hughes. The 46-year-old Goldstein, on the other hand, was a teenager during *Vacation*'s opening weekend and thus has direct experience with the outsized place the film holds in the hearts and minds of moviegoers who came of age during that era. "It's a big responsibility when you're given the reins to something you grew up loving and know inside and out," he says, on the phone from Los Angeles. "John and I took it very seriously—we didn't want to let down the high standards the first movie set."

Of course, in this context, "taking it seriously" actually translates to "making the funniest possible movie." The fact is, there's an entire generation of moviegoers for whom *Vacation* and its subsequent sequels—1985's *European Vacation*, 1989's *Christmas Vacation* and 1997's *Vegas Vacation*—carries little nostalgia or brand awareness. And maybe that's a good thing, as the franchise grew increasingly lazier and less amusing over the years. Not only that, but it spawned a host of imitators ranging from *Johnson Family Vacation* to *Little Miss Sunshine*, which only served to make the original seem less…well, *original*.

And yet, from the moment Daley and Goldstein climbed aboard the project in 2010, both writers were adamant that the new movie be the next chapter in the preexisting series rather than a ground-up reboot. "Our intention was always to make it a continuation," Goldstein says firmly. "We wouldn't have wanted it to be part of something that was trying to redo what Chevy had done so well." Daley goes one step further, remarking that the choice to cast Helms as Clark Griswold would have been "sacrilegious." Instead, the duo focused on making Rusty his own man, and appealing to the franchise's past by bringing Clark into the present via a cameo by Chase. It's an appearance that they wrote into the script early on, before they secured the actor's involvement. "We had to pay him," Goldstein, says laughing. "[Chevy] wasn't going to do it for free. And there was a scary moment where we met him in the hotel bar the night before he shot and he said, 'I made some changes.' Our heart skipped a beat, but as it turned out, the changes were very minor—they were about putting the material in the voice he felt Clark had established. We were psyched to have that input and it only made the scene that much more authentic."

Chase's appearance also highlights just how different Clark and Rusty are as fathers, which in turn indicates how much the idea of fatherhood has changed since the original *Vacation*. Working from Hughes' story, Ramis and Chase tailored Clark to be a lampoon of the '50s-era father: a man who maintained a polite distance from his family, only in their lives full-time when they were on a trip. Clark also saw no issues with letting his child chug an entire can of beer or entertaining thoughts of adultery with gorgeous ladies who looked like Christie Brinkley and zoomed along the highway in speedy cars. Rusty, on the other hand, is committed—a little *too* committed—to his family's health and happiness and is a constant presence in their lives to the point of annoyance. "We're in a different day and age where the dad is a lot more engaged with his kids," says Goldstein. "And Rusty is especially focused on being a part of his kids' lives. I think that's the nature of Ed Helms as a performer, too. He's goofy and wants the best for his family."

HOPPER STONE © WARNER BROS.

DIRECTORS JOHN FRANCIS DALEY AND JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN WITH SKYLER GISONDO AND ED HELMS ON THE SET OF *VACATION*.

But by pursing what he believes is "best" for his family, Rusty frequently undermines the stability of his household. Debbie, for example, is wondering whether she's married a well-meaning lemon, while moody teenager James is routinely menaced by his younger brother, who is allowed to bully with impunity by his hands-off parents. (Kevin, by the way, is a clear nod to the storied tradition of foul-mouthed '80s kids and Stebbins routinely steals the movie with his expertly delivered curse words.) Rusty's idea of an impromptu trip to Walley World is the latest in a long line of overreaches; from the moment he pulls up to their front door behind the wheel of an off-brand imported SUV, the Griswold clan is in for a rough time on the road. A pit stop at Debbie's old college uncovers a wild-girl phase she's labored to keep hidden, while another detour to visit Aunt Audrey (Leslie Mann) means spending time with her impossibly perfect, staunchly Republican husband, Stone (Chris Hemsworth), a rugged man's-man who only makes Rusty look like more of a putz.

The notion of the stoic Thor performing in a comedy might sound like a joke in and of itself, but Hemsworth delivers a wickedly funny supporting turn that could open up new avenues in his career. (It already has, in fact; he was recently cast in Paul Feig's upcoming *Ghostbusters* reboot, and his appearance in *Vacation* almost certainly helped him land that job.) "We got a call from his people," Goldstein remembers. "He was interested in doing comedy and liked the part, but we were uncertain because sometimes you get dramatic actors and they try too hard to be funny. Luckily, Chris brought the same seriousness to the part that he brings to everything else and it totally works. He even had a dialect coach to help him master Stone's Texas accent." In one particularly memorable scene, Hemsworth enters Rusty and Debbie's room clad only in a pair of boxers and sporting a prominent bulge that would make his hammer-wielding Asgardian warrior blush.

That's just one distinctly R-rated gag in a movie filled with hijinks and humiliations that deliberately push the envelope. Indeed, part of the reason it took Daley and Goldstein five years to make the film was an internal debate over its final rating. Although the writers were in place in 2010 and Helms arrived about two years later, in 2013 *Vacation* took an extended hiatus while Warner Bros. and New Line argued over whether it should go out into the world with an R or PG-13. "We were

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

Son of Vacation CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10
okay with whatever it was going to be rated," Daley insists. "Originally we had written it to be PG-13. But Warner Bros. and New Line weren't on the same page, so it took about a year to start everything back up again." Ultimately, those on Team R prevailed, which seems appropriate since the '83 *Vacation* received the same rating and still plays like a hard-R comedy today. "I think a lot of people forget how edgy the original is," Daley adds. "We have a kind-of incest joke in ours and there's a *real* incest joke in theirs."

According to the directors, there are even more gags that hit the cutting-room floor—not because they were too hot for the MPAA, but simply due to the fact that they wanted to deliver the zippiest, funniest *Vacation* possible. "The movie could have been two hours if we wanted it to be," admits Daley. "But there's a fatigue that comes with comedies that last [that long], where you're kind of done with laughing. I've found that the laughs drop dramatically in the third act of so many comedies. We tried to keep it as concise and rapid-fire as we could."

To aid them in the editing room, Goldstein says that they sought the input of Phil Lord and Chris Miller, the directing team responsible for such monster comedy hits as *The LEGO Movie* and *22 Jump Street*. "Their advice was, 'If you lose all your B-jokes and bring your A-jokes closer together, the movie as a whole will be improved.' We killed a lot of babies, because there were a number of jokes that weren't quite as good. You get attached to stuff you've been living with a long time."

Speaking of being attached to stuff, for now Daley and Goldstein aren't going into too much detail about their potential involvement in a *Vacation* sequel, which—based on this film's closing moments—would move the action to Europe in the tradition of Clark Griswold's second family vacation. "It would be fun to shoot in Europe. Or Vancouver for Europe," Goldstein teases, before saying that they've only had preliminary meetings about continuing with the series should their first outing be a summer smash. In the meantime, they're busily thinking of other '80s franchises they can dust off for the present day, from *The Care Bears Movie* to the 1984 Dennis Quaid star vehicle *Dreamscape*. "Maybe that's the *Vacation* sequel," Goldstein laughs. "*Dream Vacation*, where the Griswolds take a vacation in their dreams." Adds Daley: "This cannot fail. It writes itself." In your dreams, guys. ✤